Epicureanism

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Only a small percentage of Epicurus' writings have survived,[1] partly because his philosophy became unpopular once the Hellenistic reaction to the classical tradition gave way to the resurgence of non-sceptical forms of Platonism and the subsequent rise of Christianity. This makes it difficult to know in much detail what Epicurus thought about evil, but there is reason to think that he made an important advance over his predecessors.

To understand this advance, it is helpful to begin by clearing away certain interpretations. The first is that Epicurus understood evil as a theological problem. There is no good reason to think that he understood evil in this way. The concept of free will seems to enter the philosophical

[1] Epicurus (341-271 BCE) set up his school (the Garden) in Athens in about 306 BCE. His literary output was enormous. Diogenes Laertius lists the forty-one titles of Epicurus' "best" books (*Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers* X.27). None of this work has survived. What is now known about Epicurus and his philosophy depends primarily on three letters Diogenes preserves in Book X of his *Lives and Opinions*: *Letter to Herodotus* (which outlines the Epicurean philosophy of nature), *Letter to Pythocles* (which discusses natural phenomena in the sky), and *Letter to Menoeceus* (which outlines the Epicurean position on happiness).

tradition after Epicurus, during the time of late Stoicism.[2] Furthermore, even if he did possess the concept, as some scholars can appear to suppose,[3] there is no good reason to think that he understood evil as a theological problem whose solution consists in the recognition of free will. It seems clear that Epicurus did not believe in a providentially ordered world[4] and hence that he did not believe in a god whose existence evil could call into question.[5]

Epicurus did not understand evil as a theological problem, but he did explain the existence of some evil in terms of certain beliefs about theological matters. He thought that some evil is the result of common, but false beliefs about the divine. He thought that these beliefs are a prominent source of unhappiness, and that human beings are particularly prone to such

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[2] The classic discussion is now M. Frede's *A Free Will*: *Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (2011).

[3] In the introduction to his book *On the Nature of Things*, M. F. Smith writes that "[a]n extremely important point, which emerges clearly from Lucretius' account, is that the supposition of the swerve was made not only to explain how compound bodies can be formed, but also to account for free will, which Epicurus firmly believed in, but which the physical determinism of Democritus seem to have excluded" (2001: xxvi).

[4] Cf. *DRN* [*De Rerum Natura*] II.167-81, V.156-234.

[5] Lactantius (an early Christian writer, c. 240-320 CE) attributes to Epicurus an argument that appears to be part of a discussion of evil as a theological problem (Inwood and Gerson 1997: 94 [IG I-109]), but there is little reason to think that Epicurus actually gave this particular argument. For discussion, see O'Keefe 2010: 47-8.

beliefs and to superstition generally. It is in this connection that Epicurus made an important contribution to the understanding of evil.

Epicurus was interested in the practical problem of living well, and his discussion of evil is part of his solution to this problem. He rejected the dominant line of thought from the classical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. Epicurus moved away from rationalism and toward empiricism. From within this new perspective, Epicurus came to a significantly different set of conclusions about human beings, their place in reality, and the good life. Epicurus thought that the life of enlightened moderation is the good life, and he thought that "contemplation" is not essential to happiness.

Epicurus' move toward empiricism was part of a significant change of perspective in the history of philosophy. To appreciate the full extent of his contribution to this change of perspective, and the significance of his advance over his predecessors in the understanding of evil and its causes, it is necessary to clear away one more interpretation. Epicurus did not conceive of evil either as a theological problem or as a natural consequence of the existence and exercise of the will. It is true that the Epicurean Lucretius[6] discusses *libera voluntas* in *On the Nature of Things* (*De Rerum Natura*). It is true that, in translation, Lucretius is commonly portrayed as believing in free will. It is also true that Epicurus is commonly thought to be the source for this discussion in Lucretius. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Epicurus understood evil as a practical problem to be solved by the introduction of a way for human beings to control their wills.

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[6] Lucretius (c. 94 - c. 55 BCE) was a Roman poet. His poem *De Rerum Natura* is a source for Epicurean beliefs. For Lucretius' life, about which little is known, see Smith 2001: vii-x.

Although the term "free will" is sometimes used to express an ordinary part of the way human beings typically understand themselves and their behaviour,[7] it is more properly used to express a theoretical concept, like the concept of phlogiston, as Gilbert Ryle says in *The Concept of Mind*.[8] The concept of free will originated as part of a theory to explain a familiar but deeply perplexing notion that presumably is part of the way human beings have always understood themselves: that they are capable of action. The range of human behaviour seems to include things that they themselves do. In this behaviour, human beings are not forced by anybody or anything. Rather, in such cases, a human being somehow does what he does in virtue of something in his "mind". The concept of free will entered the ancient philosophical tradition in an explanation of what this thing is.

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[7] Given this use of the term, the translation of *libera voluntas* as "free will" tempts the reader to think that all the great philosophers from the past thought that in the mind of every human being there is a will and that Lucretius is part of a tradition of philosophical enquiry into the will and its freedom. In his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry for "Free Will" (2010), Timothy O' Connor can seem to suggest this understanding of the philosophical tradition. He begins his discussion of "free will" as follows. "'Free Will' is a philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives. Which sort is the free will sort is what all the fuss is about. (And what a fuss it has been: philosophers have debated this question for over two millennia, and just about every major philosopher has had something to say about it)".

[8] Ryle 1947: 62. See also Frede 2011: 2.

In the philosophical tradition that precedes Epicurus, the concept of free will is not present. Aristotle, for instance, in his philosophy of mind, has *boulēsis* play a fundamental role, but he does not conceive of *boulēsis* as a will.[9] For Aristotle, as for Plato, *boulēsis* is the desire that belongs to reason.[10] The view is that some desires belong to reason, either because a desire for the real good is fixed in reason, or because the epistemic process of determining what the real good is belongs to reason. In the latter case, accepting a belief about what the real good is constitutes a desire for what the real good is believed to be. In the former, the desire for the real good is a part of reason, and the problem is to figure out what this good is.

Reason, however, according to Aristotle, is not the only source of motivation in human beings. Human psychology does not consist in reason alone. There are other parts of the soul, for example, the appetite. This part of the soul has its own distinctive form of desire. Furthermore, it is supposed to be possible for desires in the different parts to conflict. According to Aristotle, it is possible for a human being to have conflicting motivations, one from reason and one from appetite, and to act on the basis of the appetitive desire, and so against "choice and thought".[11] This psychological state is often described, misleadingly, as "weakness of the will."

This description is misleading because Aristotle did not conceive of *boulēsis* as a will. According to Aristotle, some things human beings do, and for which they are responsible, do not involve *boulēsis*. A human being may eat because he is hungry, but he need not be thinking about whether eating is

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[9] For discussion, see Frede 2011: 19-30.

[10] *On the Soul* I.3.414b, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.2.1111b.

[11] *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.4.1148a9-10.

a good idea. His action can stem from an appetitive desire, not a desire of reason. Even so, his eating would clearly be something that he himself does, and not something anything or anybody forces him to do.

Furthermore, from Aristotle's point of view, action in terms of *boulēsis* has its ground in the attachment human beings have to the good. This assumption, which he shares with Plato and the Stoics, is that just as reason in human beings naturally seeks the truth, so also it naturally seeks the good. The form this assumption takes is not entirely clear. Fixed in reason either there is a desire for the real good or, in addition to the general epistemic process of forming and retracting beliefs on the basis of evidence, there is also an on-going and more specific process of belief formation devoted to determining what the real good is. The assumption may be false, but it is not the assumption that human beings have a will.[12]

To see that *libera voluntas* does not mean "free will" in Lucretius' discussion, note first of all that he makes his remarks just after he has said that the atoms sometimes "swerve". The Hellenistic philosophers were united by their critical reaction to what they perceived as the excesses of the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and this attitude manifests itself in Epicurus and the Epicureans in an extremely striking way. They reached across the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle to revitalise the atomist

[12] About Aristotle, W. D. Ross says that "[o]n the whole we must say that he shared the plain man's belief in free will but that he did not examine the problem very thoroughly, and he did not express himself with perfect consistency" (1923: 201). But really what Aristotle shared with the "plain man" is the belief that human beings are capable of action, not that they have free will. Cf. Frede 2011: 2-4.

philosophy of Democritus and Leucippus. It is thus quite possible that Epicurus did not believe in the swerve because he believed that human beings have free will. Instead, his belief in the swerve, if he believed in this at all, may have been part of his attempt to revitalize atomism.

In fact, this is a plausible way to understand Epicurus. Ancient atomism, as is well-known, was an expression of the enlightenment attitude that showed itself in the Milesian revolution. A driving idea in this revolution was that the gods, as they behave in the traditional stories, are not the causes of the regularity apparent in the world. Instead, as Democritus and Leucippus seem to have developed the idea, this regularity is how the random motion of the atoms through the void appears to human beings. Lucretius, in arguing for the swerve, may intend to emphasise the continuity between Epicurean atomism and the prior atomism of Democritus and Leucippus. Epicurus himself does not mention the swerve in his surviving work. So it may be that if he believed in the swerve, his belief was not connected to any worry about the integrity of human action.[13] Instead, it may well just have been part of his atomism. Furthermore, it may be that Lucretius draws the connection between the swerve and *libera voluntas* because he belonged to a tradition of Epicureans who built on and extended Epicurus' work in an effort to meet problems they perceived.[14]

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[13] The role the swerve plays in Epicurus' thought is the subject of an enormous literature. For a guide to some of it, see O'Keefe 2005.

[14] J. Annas makes a similar point. "It has been suspected … that the swerve was a late idea of Epicurus', one developed after he had written his major works, possibly in response to objections. It is also possible that Epicurus himself had no very definite theory of how the swerve underpins free

This interpretation makes sense of the way in which Epicurus expresses his concern over the implications of "fate". He was concerned. His concern is clearly evident in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

> Whom, after all, do you consider superior to the man who ... would deride the <fate> which some introduce as overlord of everything, <but sees that some things are necessitated,> others are due to fortune, and others depend on us, since necessity is accountable to no one, and fortune is an unstable thing to watch, while that which depends on us, with which culpability and its opposite are naturally associated, is free of an overlord? For it would be better to follow the mythology about gods than be a slave to the "fate" of the natural philosophers: the former at least hints at the hope of begging the gods off by means of worship, whereas the latter involves an inexorable necessity (X.133-4; Long and Sedley 1987: 102 [LS 20 A]).

But Epicurus, in these remarks, does not express a theory of mind. He simply expresses the ordinary idea that some human behaviour consists in things that human beings themselves do, as opposed to things they are made to do by fate or by the gods. So, in this case at least, there is no reason to think that Epicurus possessed a substantive concept of free will.

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agency, and that later Epicureans filled in the story, possibly in divergent ways …" (Annas 1992: 187-8).

Lucretius, like Epicurus, is concerned about "fate" or "destiny".[15] He notes that human beings and other living things are free to pursue their own good, unless they are subject to force or are otherwise constrained. Living things, unless they are defective, can move for the sake of their own ends. They can take steps to move "where pleasure leads" them, as opposed to being made to do whatever they do by being pushed or shoved. The "decrees of destiny", or "fate", can appear to be a way of pushing and shoving, but whether in fact it is or not, Lucretius says that the "swerve" defeats and thereby removes this particular threat to *libera voluntas*:

> Moreover, if all movements are invariably linked, if new movement arises from old in unalterable succession, if there is no atomic swerve to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of an endless chain of causation, what is the source of this free will (*libera*)[16] possessed by living creatures all over the earth? What, I ask, is the course of this power of will (*voluntas*) wrested from destiny, which enables us to advance where pleasure leads us, and to alter our movements not at a fixed time or place, but at the direction of our minds? For undoubtedly in each case it is the individual will that gives the initial impulse to such actions and channels movements though the limbs. (*De Rerum Natura* II. 251-62; LS 20 F; Smith 2001: 41.)

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[15] For some discussion, see Long 1986: 56-61.

[16] In their translation, Long and Sedley render *libera voluntas* as 'free volition' (1987:106). So does O'Keefe (2010: 74-75).

But there is no affirmation of a substantive concept of free will in these remarks. Lucretius sees the swerve as preventing "fate" or "destiny" from threatening *libera voluntas*, and it seems clear that he uses *libera voluntas* to express the ordinary idea that some behaviour consists in things that "living creatures" do, as opposed to things they are made to do.

If there is a temptation to think that something more is going on, this thought becomes much less tempting once one understands how the Epicurean argument was understood in antiquity. For this understanding, the primary evidence is Cicero's *On Fate*.[17] In this work, Cicero reports that Carneades criticised the argument (XI.23; LS 20 E 4). According to the criticism, it is acceptable in ordinary language to say that something happens without a cause. But such assertions mean only that there is no external antecedent cause. They do not mean that there is no cause whatsoever (XI.23-4; LS 20 E 5). In the case of an atom, for example, when it moves without an external antecedent cause, the cause of the motion is internal, in the nature of the atom (XI.25; LS 20 E 6). Similarly, for the "voluntary movements" of the mind, it is acceptable to say that there is no cause because there is no external antecedent cause. But it does not follow that there is no cause of these movements (XI.25; LS 20 E 7).

Carneades, as Cicero portrays him, does not understand the Epicureans to say that there is an uncaused cause of the motions by which human beings move to "where pleasure leads" them. He uses the "power of the will" to talk about the "voluntary movements" (*motus voluntarios*) of the mind, whatever these movements are. These movements are called

[17] For discussion, see Long and Sedley 1987: 104-5, 107-12.

"voluntary" because they are not forced on a human being by external antecedent causes. The point was that these motions in the mind, insofar as they are voluntary, have no such causes. These motions are the unspecified things that happen in the mind when human beings do things, as opposed to having things done to them. This was the content of the Epicurean premise, as Carneades seems to have understood it, and this also seems to be the content of the premise whose truth Lucretius attempts to preserve when he says that it is necessary to "annul the decrees of destiny".[18]

So there is good reason to think that the Epicureans did not understand evil in terms of free will. Epicurus and Lucretius no doubt accepted the commonplace that human beings are capable of action, but this is all that *libera voluntas* means in Lucretius' remarks. The focus of Epicurus' discussion of evil was practical. He thought that experience showed that "pleasure" and "pain" are the good and the bad in life, and that the most important problem for human beings is to figure out how to control their behaviour, so that they attain the good but not the bad. But it is a mistake to think that Epicurus explained this control in terms of the will.

Just how Epicurus did explain this control is unfortunately much less clear, but the first step to a proper appreciation of his thought is to see that he rejected reason, as it was classically understood in Plato and Aristotle, and hence that he did not think that happiness is a matter of "contemplation" (*theōria*). Epicurus believed that the study of nature would be unnecessary were human beings not prone to worrisome false beliefs about celestial phenomena (LS B 25). He thought that human beings, if they do not

[18] My argument is a variation on one M. Frede constructs for a different purpose (2011: 91-5).

understand the nature of reality, are plagued by fear of the sorts of events described in mythology. Human beings make up threatening stories about natural phenomena they do not understand. They think these phenomena indicate divine mood and that storms and other such phenomena are punishment from the gods. For Epicurus, knowledge of physics contributes to the good life by dispelling the fears enshrined in mythology.

Epicurus thought that theoretical investigations are useful to correct the unfortunate and all too common tendency of human beings to form certain distressing but false beliefs. Human beings are prone to such beliefs about the gods, death, the availability of good things, and the likelihood of experiencing bad things. Yet, in truth, as Epicurus seems to have stated it in his fourfold remedy, "God presents no fears, death no worries, and while good is readily attainable, bad is readily endurable" (LS 25 J).[19]

Epicurus advances this remedy as a solution to life's most difficult and worrying problem. A human being who takes the remedy is supposed to realise that there is an easy-to-execute and effective plan for living in a way that is overwhelmingly likely to result in a life in which the pleasure taken in one's circumstances vastly outweighs the pain.[20] This knowledge is a source

[19] The sequence of topics in the fourfold remedy follows the sequence in the *Letter to Menoeceus*. The second topic has received the most discussion in the secondary literature. Epicurus tells Menoeceus to "accustom [himself] to believe that death is nothing to us" (*Letter to Menoeceus* X.124; LS 24 A). For an interesting analysis of the argument, see Broome 2008.

[20] For discussion and a helpful collection of the evidence for Epicurus' understanding of pleasure, including the difficult distinction between

of immense relief and tremendous satisfaction. The relief, because it consists in the removal of prior worries, makes a human being happier than he or she was before taking the remedy. But the idea also seems to be that the knowledge itself is a source of immense satisfaction. Moreover, the satisfaction taken is on-going because the knowledge is on-going. The knowledge ensures that the few bad things that do happen are not nearly disturbing enough to undermine one's overall happiness.

Given only this much, there can appear to be a significant resemblance between the Epicurean conception of happiness and the conception present in Plato and Aristotle. In Plato, given the picture in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, the best existence is the one the soul enjoys in its disincarnate and natural state, fixed in contemplation, free from practical concerns and the need to exercise reason to meet those concerns. Its existence, in this natural and disincarnate state, is characterised by knowledge of the Forms. Aristotle's position is more nuanced. He thinks that contemplation contributes most of all to happiness,[21] but he also thinks that the excellent exercise of reason in practical matters contributes to happiness and hence is a good life "secondarily,"[22] or in a "secondary way."[23] Since for Epicurus there is immense pleasure in the knowledge that a certain plan for

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katastematic and *kinetic* pleasure that the doxographical tradition attributes to Epicurus, see Long and Sedley 1987: 121-125.

[21] *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8.1178b28-32.

[22] *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8.1178a9.

[23] Just what he had in mind is notoriously obscure. For a possible interpretation, see Richardson Lear 2004: 205-7.

living is both straightforward and likely to result in a good and happy life, it might appear that he too has a version of the view that happiness is most of all a matter of contemplation and the exercise of reason.

In fact, there is reason to doubt that Epicurus took this view. The evidence is sparse, but it is not hard to get the impression that Epicurus rejected this way of thinking about happiness and knowledge as part of his more general rejection of Platonic and Aristotelian rationalism.

In Plato, knowledge and expertise is a matter of "reason". This is Socrates' point in the *Gorgias*. He says that rhetoric is not an expertise, but is a matter of "experience" (*empeiria*), where "practice" (*tribē*) and "memory" (*mnēmē*) are examples of such cognition (462b11-c7, 463a6-c7, 500a7-c6). In the *Phaedo*, when Socrates mentions questions he considered in his youth but now finds confusing, he refers to a tradition in which knowledge is a matter of experience, where perception and memory are instances of this form of cognition (96b4-8). Plato places Socrates in opposition to this "empirical" tradition. This is true in the *Gorgias* and also in the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates famously argues that the lover of wisdom should not fear death. For the lover of wisdom, the body and the senses are obstacles. The wisdom the lover seeks consists in knowledge of Forms, knowledge that is a matter of "reason" (65a9-7b5).

Aristotle rejects significant parts of the Platonic ontology, but he accepts the broad outline of Plato's rationalism. In the *Metaphysics*, in his theory of induction (which seems to depend on the empiricist tradition Socrates mentions in the autobiography passage), Aristotle is careful to distinguish "knowledge" from "experience," which precedes it in the

sequence.[24] Furthermore, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that reason in one part of the soul is that by which human beings contemplate realities, that happiness most of all consists in the perfection of this part of the soul, and that the perfection of this part of the soul makes a human being most resemble the perfect existence the first unmoved mover enjoys.[25]

In contrast, Epicurus stresses memory in a way which suggests that he is part of the empiricist tradition that Plato and Aristotle rejected. In the *Letter to Herodotus,* Epicurus makes memory play an important role with respect to happiness and the good life. He says that "freedom from disturbance … involves a continual remembrance (mnēmēn) of the general and most important points [of Epicureanism]" (X.82). It is true that Epicurus tried to present his doctrines in summary form for easy consumption and

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[24] *Posterior Analytics* II.19.100a3-10, *Metaphysics* I.1.980a27-1a12. In the *Metaphysics*, in his discussion of induction, Aristotle mentions Polus, and so shows himself to work within the framework Socrates sets out in the *Gorgias*. For discussion, see Frede 1996a: 11 and Frede 1996b: 169.

[25] *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2.1139a, X.7.1177b, and X.8.1178b. In this study of the history of ethics, Terence Irwin states the point. Aristotle "declares that happiness consists in theoretical 'study' or 'contemplation' (*theoria*), grasping the ultimate universal truths about the universe (1177a12-18). ... The exercise of theoretical reason in study is the best exercise of human reason; its activities are choiceworthy solely for their own sake, and in them a human being comes closest to the condition of a purely rational being, a god. Contemplation is the highest fulfilment of our nature as rational beings; it is the sort of rational activity that we share with the gods, who are rational beings with no need to apply reason to practice" (2007: 149).

retention.[26] It is also true that he uses *theōria* and its cognates,[27] as these are ordinary Greek words. But the stress he places on memory and the "continual remembrance" of his doctrines suggests that he rejected the rationalism of the prior classical tradition.[28] It suggests that he did not think of the knowledge that contributes to happiness in terms of "contemplation" (*theōria*) and the perfection of reason, and that he rejected the conception of knowledge and happiness in the work of Plato and Aristotle.

Although the issue is difficult to settle conclusively, it seems that for Epicurus knowledge contributes to happiness in a significantly different way. It is not that contemplating the content of the knowledge, without the obscuring presence of false belief, is itself supremely pleasurable. Rather, the idea seems to be that once a human being really knows,[29] for example, that the "good is readily attainable" and that the "bad is readily endurable," as is proclaimed in the fourfold remedy, he takes pleasure in thinking about the various circumstances in which he is likely to find himself in the future.[30] This is the opposite of what typically happens when someone thinks

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[26] See X.35. Cf. X.36 and X.116.

[27] So, for example, Epicurus urges Pythocles to devote himself to the "study of first principles (*Letter to Pythocles* X.116). In their translation, Inwood and Gerson use "contemplation" instead of "study" ([1997]: 28).

[28] M. Frede takes the Epicurean rejection of "dialectic" as evidence (X.31). See 1990: 240-41.

[29] Epicurean epistemology is not well-understood. For a detailed study from within the context of the empiricist/rationalist debate, see Allen 2001.

[30] Epicurus seems to have thought that the recollection and anticipation of pleasure is an important way to counteract bodily pain. In this letter to

about the negative consequences of certain current actions, say smoking. Thinking about the results of smoking can be extremely distressing, and this experience can change one's behaviour.[31] Epicurus seems to rely on this general cognitive mechanism, which would have been understood to belong to "experience," as opposed to "reason," in his understanding of how the knowledge enshrined in the fourfold remedy contributes to happiness. When a human being thinks about how things might go for him in the future, which happens whenever he thinks about what to do, he experiences immense pleasure because he knows that "God presents no fears, death no worries, and while good is readily attainable, bad is readily endurable".

Epicurus understands this pleasure taken in knowledge of the four-fold remedy as constituitive of the "delighted mind" and as part of the "highest and most secure joy" in the "blessed" life of a human being. This is evident both in his own remarks on the nature of the good life and in the discussion of his views in the doxographical tradition:

> [A] delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation that our nature will avoid pain while acquiring all

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Idomeneus, Epicurus says that he has set the pleasure he experiences in thinking about his past conversations against his current suffering from strangury and dysentery (X.22; LS 24 D). See also Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.95; LS 21 T. Cf. Long and Sedley1987: 124.

[31] This mechanism seems to be presupposed in anti-smoking campaigns that employ various horrific images to indicate the negative utility of smoking. For a contemporary discussion of such cognitive mechanisms, and their place in a theory of practical reason, see Pollock 2006: 48-9, 62-5.

> the pleasures I just mentioned (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.41-4; LS 21L; Long and Sedley 1987: 117; Inwood and Gerson 1997: 56-7).
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> The comfortable state of the flesh, and the confident expectation of this, contain the highest and most secure joy for those who are capable of reasoning (Plutarch, *Against Epicurean Happiness* 1089D; LS 21 N; Long and Sedley 1987: 117).[32]
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> [T]he health of the body and freedom of the soul from disturbance … is the goal of a blessed life (*Letter to Menoeceus* X.128; LS 21 B 1).[33]

Just how the fourfold remedy contributes to this "delight" and "joy" is not easy to articulate precisely, but the mechanism is clearly very different from the one that Plato suggests (in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*) for understanding the contribution knowledge of the Forms makes to happiness and the good life. Epicurus seems to have tried to understand knowledge of the remedy,

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[32] Plutarch goes on to express considerable doubt about the reasonableness of this "confident expectation," given the uncertainty of the future and the weakness and vulnerability of the flesh (1090A-B).

[33] Cf. *Letter to Menoeceus* X.131; LS 21 B 5. "When we say that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated…. By pleasure, we mean the absence of pain and of trouble in the soul".

and the way it underwrites “joy” and the good life, in a way that does not recognize the existence of reason as it was classically conceived.

It is in this connection that Epicurus broke important new ground in the philosophical discussion of evil. At a certain level of abstraction, he looks like his predecessors in the classical tradition. He thought that the good life was one of happiness, that what detracts from happiness is bad, that living the best life is a matter of having a certain wisdom and expertise, and that most human beings never acquire this wisdom because they are subject to false beliefs about god, death, the availability of good things, and the difficulty of bad things. Epicurus thought that human beings must control themselves and that this means that they must control their beliefs. But what is most distinctive and interesting about Epicurus is the particular way he cast this general idea. He worked within a broadly empiricist framework, not the rationalist one that figured so prominently in the work of Plato and Aristotle. Epicurus thought that there is immense pleasure in the knowledge that “God presents no fears, death no worries, and while good is readily attainable, bad is readily endurable”, but he did not conceive of human beings and the place of knowledge in the good life in terms of reason and its perfection. Instead, Epicurus tried to conceive of human beings in terms of experience. It is from within this perspective that he conceived of the good life and the contribution knowledge of the fourfold remedy makes to happiness. The lack of evidence makes it difficult to reconstruct his view in detail, but it seems clear from what has survived that Epicurus’ view was

innovative and that he made a historically significant advance over his predecessors in the understanding of evil and its causes.[34]

Further Reading

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